

RHONDA WHITEHEAD

WATER SERIES

Some paintings take a long time to grow, to emerge from the experience which inspired them. Rhonda Whitehead had lived in Norfolk for ten years before it became the subjects of her paintings. Since then she has absorbed the knowledge of that strange, flat landscape where nothing intervenes between soil and sky, where the grey light renders colour so much more intensely than sunshine and has transported it into paintings so idiosyncratic that it is difficult to believe that she has ever worked in any other way.

In fact like many artists of her generation her early work was minimalist : precisely planned paintings which required a close adherence to working drawings. Yet though the appearance of the work has changed radically, her preoccupation with the interactions of colour and structure have remained constant.

There is a way of interpreting landscape – Durer's Large Piece of Turf is in its lineage – which scrutinises a tiny area and re-presents it as a paradigm of the whole. The artist seems, as in minimalist work, to be absent in any affective sense, yet such work can only emerge from an intense understanding of place. There is a tension between this understanding and the artist's self- negation from the act of painting. Because of her technique, she is in a sense absent from the record of her relationship with the countryside. She uses thin washes of watercolour and oils seldom putting the paint on with the brush, preferring to apply overlays of colour with a sponge leaving a smooth surface in which the colour is unmediated by texture or by traces of the artist's actions.

Some paintings have a vanishing point, a terminus, just outside the picture area. Many are set on a diagonal, more dynamic than an orthogonal arrangement. There is a sense of movement towards an unlimited space beyond the picture area, formed by colour graduated from green to gold or blazing in scarlets, a counterpart to those vast East Anglian skies. Yet the paintings are all transpositions of a material existence.

The Broads and wetlands are the subjects of these paintings referring to the patterns of clouds and their reflections in the waters of the marshlands. Sometimes, looking into clear water, reflected images conceal the real forms below the surface, denying depth and identity so that the space we see is ambiguous. Such an uncertainty is a characteristic of these paintings in which areas of colour float across the surface. They seem to be arbitrary in their arrangement as there is no real structure in sky and water comparable to the stasis of field patterns. As we watch, the transparent shapes swell and recede, darken and lighten. These are evasive paintings, they alter suddenly and cannot be definitely reproduced because they work in the same way as natural light and colour: they are never still.

Margaret Garlake



Mandells Gallery Elm Hill Norwich NR3 1HN Tues to Sat 10 – 5.0pm

28th Dec 2010 until 11th Jan 2011